UT beats Missouri, ends string of losing seasons SPORTSDAY

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TEXAS

Vacancies hobble U.S. district courts

Judges struggle to cover caseloads while Trump reshapes the judiciary

By NICOLE COBLER
Washington Bureau
nicole.cobler@dallasnews.com

WASHINGTON — The Senate has confirmed President Donald Trump's appellate court picks at a record pace, but federal trial courts in Texas are still struggling with a high number of vacancies, causing a backlog of cases and overworked judges.

Trump is on track to reshape the federal courts. More than 100 benches were vacant when he took office, including 11 district judgeships in Texas.

The president has focused on appellate courts, a strategy conservative legal activists have lauded as the most effective way to reshape the judiciary. But much of the work of federal courts is at the trial level, and the relative neglect of district court vacancies in Texas has left chronic backlogs, with judges working extra hours to ensure that Texans don't wait months to have their cases heard.

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Damon Winter/The New York Times

Michael Flynn appeared with Donald Trump, then the Republican nominee for president, at a national security roundtable at Trump Tower in New York in August.

WHITE HOUSE

Trump legal team plots attack plan

Credibility of ex-aide Flynn would be target, sources say

FROM WIRE REPORTS

President Donald Trump's legal team plans to cast former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn as a liar seeking to protect himself if he accuses the president or his senior aides of any wrongdoing, according to three people familiar with the strategy.

The approach would mark a sharp break from Trump's previously sympathetic posture toward Flynn, whom he called a "wonderful man" when Flynn departed the White House in February. Earlier this month, the president did not rule out a pardon for Flynn, who is cooperating with Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election.

Attorneys for Trump and his top advisers have privately expressed confidence that Flynn does not have any evidence that could implicate the president or his White House team. But since Flynn's cooperation agreement with prosecutors was made public earlier this month, the administration has

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SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

No longer a reach

Andy Jacobsohn/Staff Photographer

Eliana Yi, an undergraduate student in piano performance, has found a new range in her ability using SMU's smaller keyboards. The alternative grand pianos, which the school began using 17 years ago, have leveled the playing field for pianists who have small hands.

Alternatively sized keyboards help pianists who have small hands

By MARC RAMIREZ
Staff Writer
mramirez@dallasnews.com

Eliana Yi dreamed of pursuing piano performance in college, never mind that her fingers could barely reach the length of an octave. Unable to fully play many works by Romantic-era composers including Beethoven and Brahms, she tried anyway — and, in her determination to spend hours practicing one notoriously "stretchy" Chopin concerto, wound up injuring herself.

Her awareness of the limitations of her hand span made competitions even worse for Yi.

"I would just go to pieces," the Southern Methodist University junior recalled. "There were just too many octaves. I remember asking one piano teacher, 'Am I just going to play Bach and Mozart for the rest of my life?'"

The efforts of SMU keyboard studies chair Carol Leone are changing

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TAX OVERHAUL

IRS rains on Texans' parade

Paying property taxes a year in advance apparently won't help on your return

By TOM BENNING and JULIETA CHIQUILLO
Staff Writers

Tens of thousands of Texans may have been looking to prepay next year's property taxes by the end of this year to take full advantage of a break that will soon be curtailed by the massive tax revamp that just cleared Congress.

But new guidelines released by the Internal Revenue Service on Wednesday appear to have torpedoed that option, for taxpayers in Texas at least.

Starting in January, the federal tax code will cap the deduction on state and local taxes — such as property, income and sales levies — at $10,000 a year. But that restriction doesn't apply to the 2017 tax returns that will be filed by mid-April.

So tax offices in Dallas County and beyond became busy this holiday season with taxpayers looking to maximize this year's unlimited deduction, not just by paying this year's property taxes now but also by prepaying some or all of their estimated 2018 property taxes.

However, the IRS has advised that a prepayment by Dec. 31 is deductible on 2017 federal tax returns only if the local tax authority has already told

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IMMIGRATION

Protected Salvadorans wait, fear deportation

Trump already ended temporary status for Haitians, Nicaraguans

By JAMES BARRAGÁN
Austin Bureau
jbarragan@dallasnews.com

The holiday season in Cristian Chavez's Houston home is usually full of cheer, with relatives and friends eating tamales and other Central American dishes before unwrapping gifts.

Chavez is looking forward to more happy times with his wife and two stepchildren. But he can't help but worry about a dark cloud looming over the season.

He is one of the more than

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NATION & WORLD

Prince Harry interviews Obama
In a wide-ranging interview conducted by Prince Harry, former President Barack Obama talks about life after the presidency, Aretha Franklin, the responsible use of social media, and other topics. **8A**

Record-setting cold grips the North
Freezing temperatures and below-zero wind chills settle over much of the northern United States, including a record 37 below zero in International Falls, Minn. **5A**

METRO & STATE

DISD to play role in accountability
Dallas ISD will play a part in setting up state-approved alternatives to the coming statewide accountability system that gives individual schools A-F grades. **1B**

BUSINESS

Area home values jump $50B
Residential home values in the Dallas-Fort Worth area increased by more than $50 billion in 2017, according to the digital real estate marketing firm Zillow. **1D**

SPORTSDAY

McKinney grad back for bowl game
Former McKinney North star Ronald Jones II is back in the area as a standout running back for the USC Trojans, who play Ohio State in the Cotton Bowl Classic on Friday night. **1C**

ARTS & LIFE

Delayed review shows power of music
Music writer Kelly Dearmore remembers a stellar night for the D-FW music scene — soon to be eclipsed by the Las Vegas shootings. **1E**

Mostly cloudy, cold

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